

House Bill 24  
March 8, 2013  
Presented by Chas Van Genderen  
Senate Natural Resource Committee

Mr. Chairman and committee members, I am Chas Van Genderen, Administrator for the Parks Division for the Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP). I am here today on behalf of the Director in support of House Bill 24.

In 1939, Montana's legislators established a state park system and commission made up of citizens to help develop, manage, and improve the system. We need to once again engage citizens. The system has struggled consistently, and this bill represents a solution where people from a variety of places and interests help direct and resolve longstanding problems.

We stand today with one of the weakest state park systems in the country according to the data. This is not new information. We have been studying it since 1990, and have known there was a problem for a long time.

In 1978 Robert Wambach, former Director of FWP wrote about state parks: "Our paleontological, archaeological and historical resources blend into the panorama of our natural resources to form a landscape of almost unlimited recreational opportunity. And just as in the case of fish and wildlife, these recreational resources must be conserved, regulated and managed if we are to pass on to tomorrow's generations the legacy we have received from past generations." HB 24 will allow citizens to get involved and fix their park system.

The simple fact is that the funding sources and the issues that face fish and wildlife are very different from the funding sources and issues that state parks are faced with today. We need a new approach.

While we struggle with the park system, there is good news. According to a 2010 study by the University of Montana's Bureau of Business and Economic Research, our state park visitors generate \$289 million dollars for local economies, sustaining 1600 jobs annually in tourism-related areas. Parks are good for our economy.

In another survey completed in December by the Institute for Tourism and Recreation Research, of a sample size of nearly 600 Montanans, 99.6% of the respondents said it was important for Montana to have state parks. Parks are important for families.

We can report that more than two million visitors went to our state parks last year, the second busiest year in history for parks. The largest visitation year was 2009 when our economy was weakest. Visitors in towns like Glendive told us it was because parks are a close to home alternative and just because the economy was bad they would not stop building strong family memories. Parks are important to communities.

While this is all good news, there are tough decisions that lie ahead. Parks' resources are stretched. We operate more state parks (that includes seven National Historic Landmarks) on a tighter budget and with fewer people than our surrounding states. Our infrastructure is aging. For example, we need a fire suppression system at Bannack (our state's first territorial capital) that costs more than one million dollars, we need to fix and ground the lighting system in Lewis & Clark Caverns (that cost is over a million dollars), and we need to look at our state parks system and potentially streamline as we have parks that don't necessarily qualify to be called state parks.

Recreation is a top industry in Montana. Montana State Parks oversees four recreation grant programs, through separate federal and state funding sources. These recreation programs provide funds for development and maintenance of hiking and biking trails, snowmobile and OHV use and safety education around the state, and for the development of outdoor recreation in local communities by helping to build swimming pools, baseball fields and playgrounds. At some level the state has a responsibility to help coordinate with other agencies as part of making recreation in Montana the best it can be at the local, state and federal levels.

In the 1970s, the Parks division was called the "Recreation and Parks Division", and at some point the word "recreation" was dropped, but it is still part of what we manage for our citizens.

A citizen-based Parks & Recreation Board would provide attention needed on issues facing state parks, recreation and heritage sites and help make the tough decisions that will keep resources funded, maintained and affordable for Montanans today and for generations to come.

This is not my park system. State Parks and Recreation programs belong to the citizens of Montana. As we approach the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the park system, we can do the right thing. We can do what our forefathers did in 1939. We can engage citizens in helping to improve their park system for the benefit of their families, their community, and their local economy. HB 24 does just that.

Thank you for your time and consideration, and I'll be glad to take any questions.